

Coaching Youth Livestock Projects

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Raising animals for a 4-H or an FFA livestock project gives young people an excellent opportunity to gain life skills and build good character traits. But raising an animal alone is difficult for most young people. They need coaching from parents, adult volunteers, county Extension agents, and agricultural science teachers. Becoming a successful coach takes practice and patience. A successful coach

- has a defined coaching philosophy and objectives,
- understands various coaching styles,
- understands the importance of effective communication,
- gains credibility with youths,
- motivates youths, and
- teaches effectively.

Successful coaches help youths achieve their personal goals and motivate them to keep participating in livestock shows.

Define your coaching philosophy and objectives

Rainer Martens, in the second edition of his book *Successful Coaching* (1990), writes that successful coaches “help youth develop new skills, enjoy competing with others, and feel good about themselves.” Successful coaches also know their subject matter, are excellent motivators, and show empathy with youths. Good 4-H and FFA coaches teach skills for everyday living as well as skills for raising livestock projects. They can instill character traits that prepare youths to make positive contributions to their

community. Adult leaders’ coaching and teaching directly affect what young people take away from their livestock project experience.

Once you decide to take on the responsibility of coaching youth livestock projects, you should develop a coaching philosophy, which is similar to an organizational or business vision statement. A coaching philosophy provides a basis for a coach’s beliefs and priorities involving young people and their livestock projects. Here are some examples of coaching philosophies for livestock projects:

- The goal of coaching livestock projects is to develop skills and sportsmanship and teach the value of teamwork—without sacrificing fun.
- A coaching (teaching) philosophy involves bringing young people together to teach them the fundamentals of raising livestock projects and to instill in them a sense of self worth.
- I will do whatever I can to help my young exhibitors have outstanding skills and attitudes and be valuable team players and great human beings.
- We will continue to develop strong minds and healthy bodies for our young people’s future while we build character in the show ring.
- It doesn’t matter what place young competitors get at the end of the show; if they have learned something new, they have won first place anyway.

The most common coaching objectives are to help youths be successful and have fun and to help them develop physically, psychologically, and socially. When establishing coaching objectives, you must determine what is most important in the livestock project experience. Above all, your coaching philosophy and objectives should center on the young person's well-being. Your primary focus should be to provide challenges and develop life skills and character traits in youths.

Some coaches find it difficult to pinpoint what is most important to the livestock project experience. In a society that rewards winners, youths participating in any kind of competition feel the need to win to be successful.

A good adult leader or coach emphasizes the youths first and winning second. That means resisting the urge to push youths to win at all costs, a goal that can harm their development and self-esteem. Participating in livestock projects immerses a young person in competition. Competition promotes commitment and teaches youths about moral development. A person who is committed to a cause while learning life lessons doesn't need to win a contest to be a winner. One of the coach's roles is to communicate this message.

Choose your coaching style

Determining which coaching style is appropriate for youth livestock projects is important. Martens identifies the three most widely used coaching styles:

- **Command:** The coach makes all decisions related to livestock projects based on the assumption that he or she is knowledgeable in all aspects of the project. The youths must respond to the coach's decisions and commands.
- **Submissive:** The coach takes as little responsibility in the decision-making process as possible, giving little guidance, instruction, or direction to the youths.
- **Cooperative:** Decision making is shared between the coach and the youths. The coach values their input and recognizes that they cannot gain responsibility unless they are involved in a decision-making process. At the same time, the coach is still

the leader and should provide guidance and instruction during the decision-making process.

For example, when coaches first advise a new family about a livestock project they usually pass along their expertise through a command style of coaching. As they continue to work with the youths, they should transition to a cooperative coaching philosophy. Over time, the coach could yield some or all of the decisions to the youths and their families, transitioning to a cooperative or a submissive style.

Most of the time, the coaching style depends on the situation. However, you should be working toward a cooperative style of coaching with youths and families. This ensures that the youths are gaining responsibility, goals are being met, and you are still actively involved in the project.

In the cooperative coaching style, an adult leader/coach and a youth establish a set of goals together. For example, they may decide to increase weight gain for the young person's commercial steers by 20 percent over the previous year's weight. To achieve this goal, the young person is responsible for feeding the steers twice a day. If the coach notices that the steers are not being fed on schedule, he or she must intervene and correct the problem, emphasizing the goal that was set and what it takes to achieve it.

Communicate effectively

To be a successful coach you must be an effective communicator. Martens defines communication as sending and receiving messages, both verbally and nonverbally. Communication has two parts: content and emotion. Content represents the overall message and is expressed verbally. Emotion affects the way an individual interprets the message; it is expressed nonverbally. According to Martens, 70 percent of communication takes place nonverbally.

Successful coaches are experts at sending and receiving messages. Some coaches struggle with communication, though, because they are more effective at *sending* mes-

sages than receiving them. This often results in misunderstandings between the coach and the young person that can cause the youth to become unmotivated and lose confidence. To remedy this, coaches may try to change their coaching style, thinking a new approach might benefit the youth.

However, many coaches do not understand that the misinterpretation of messages can have a number of causes. Many coaches think that misinterpretation takes place because of things they say, but it could be their nonverbal communication that causes a young person to eventually lose interest in participating in livestock projects.

Here is an example of verbal miscommunication:

An adult leader/coach instructs a girl to feed her new pig two cans of feed. When the girl goes out to feed, there are large cans and small cans. The girl feeds the pig two large cans when it should have been two small ones. Four hours later the adult goes out to check the new pig; it is lying on its side, breathing heavily from overeating. The pig now has a life-threatening stomach virus. If the coach had properly communicated the feeding instructions, this incident would not have happened.

An example of nonverbal miscommunication is when a coach shakes his head during a practice livestock showing. The youth might interpret this to mean that she has done something wrong, but in reality the coach is angry with himself for not teaching a method correctly.

Miscommunication when raising livestock can be detrimental to both the animals and the people involved. The following is a list of reasons Martens provides for ineffective communication:

- The content you wish to communicate may be wrong for the situation.
- The message does not communicate what you intend it to because you lack the verbal or nonverbal skills needed to send the message.
- The youth does not receive the message because he or she isn't paying attention.
- The youth, lacking adequate listening or nonverbal skills, misinterprets the content of the message or

fails to understand it.

- The youth understands the message content but misinterprets its intent.
- The messages sent are inconsistent over time, leaving the youth confused about what is meant.

By establishing clear messages and making sure they are interpreted correctly, adult leaders/coaches and youths will be more successful in achieving their goals.

Gain credibility with the youths

One of the most challenging, yet most important, aspects of coaching is gaining credibility with youths. You can do this by

- being an active listener,
- providing positive reinforcement, and
- having realistic expectations.

Listening is a skill that many coaches take for granted, but the fact is that most untrained listeners (ordinary people) hear only 20 percent of what others say, according to Martens. He says there are two types of listeners: active and passive.

Active listeners answer questions and interpret information during a conversation. Active listening is an excellent form of listening if you let the youth know that you understand his or her feelings and are willing to help.

Passive listeners are silent during the entire conversation. Passive listening is effective most of the time, but the speaker may feel that you are not paying attention or do not understand what he or she is saying.

It is important to learn to be a good listener when working with youths and their livestock projects. Failing to listen actively could cause harm to the young person or to the animal.

Positive reinforcement is another critical tool for gaining credibility with young people. As the youths begin to work toward achieving their goals, coaches must provide positive reinforcement. You can do this by helping the youths set goals that allow them to feel successful when they work hard.

At times, youths will become frustrated with their livestock projects. A steer may set up incorrectly, a pig may go off feed, or a lamb may not want to walk. In these situations, you can provide positive reinforcement to show that despite difficulties, the young person is making progress toward his or her goals. Don't overdo it, though; if you give too much reinforcement, the youths may think you are not sincere.

Martens emphasizes rewarding performance rather than outcomes; rewarding youths for their effort rather than their actual success; rewarding small progress during the process of achieving larger goals; and rewarding the learning and performance of emotional and social skills as well as life skills. He emphasizes rewarding youths often at the beginning of a project and only occasionally after the skills are learned.

When you begin coaching youth livestock projects, understand the age and skill level of the youths you will be working with, and set your expectations accordingly. Realize that kids will be kids. If you are working with a first-year 4-H'er who is only 12 years old, he or she may not know exactly what to do with the animal. Start with simple steps, understanding that there will be times when a youth's attention span becomes short and he or she loses interest in the task. Patience is important; keep the youth on task without pushing too much.

Motivate the youths

In the beginning, the youths may know little about their animals and want to know what they will gain from the experience. To successfully motivate the youths, keep the livestock projects fun and make sure that the young people feel worthy and successful in competition. Understand and demonstrate to them that winning is not everything and that success comes from setting goals and working to achieve them.

People are motivated in two ways: extrinsically and intrinsically. Extrinsic motivation is motivation outside a person or the job at hand. Examples include ribbons, trophies, money, free time, or other benefits. Although extrinsic motivation is the most commonly used, it is the least effective.

Intrinsic motivation comes from within a person through the job or activity at hand. Examples include recognition, achievement, challenge, and development, according to R. N. Lussier and C. F. Achua in their book *Leadership: Theory, Application, Skill Development*. Successful coaches emphasize intrinsic motivation, so youths have fun and feel they are achieving success on their own. This helps them to stay motivated and engaged with their livestock projects.

One reason youths lose motivation is that they believe they will never succeed. This "self-fulfilling prophecy" of failure can be instilled in the youths or validated by friends or by coaches, parents, and other adults. Coaches must dispel this belief by supporting youths who may be experiencing frustration and low self-confidence.

Youths may also become unmotivated if the goals they set are unrealistic. In this case, you must help the youths restructure their goals so they may be reached. Be flexible in goal setting to allow the youths to shoot for the stars, but make modifications if they fall short.

Many youths achieve their goals but feel they are not successful because they did not win over fellow competitors. For example, a young person may set a goal to have his hog gain 20 percent more than last year. If he achieves this goal but still does not win first place, he might feel that he has failed. Emphasize to the youths that success is not defined by winning or losing but by setting and achieving personal goals. Win or lose, youths who set and meet challenging, specific, and attainable personal goals are successful.

Sometimes—for a number of reasons—youths decide that raising livestock projects is not right for them. These reasons include the following:

- Finding another activity that interested them more
- Losing interest in raising livestock projects
- Becoming unable to afford to raise a livestock project
- Discovering that more work than they originally thought is required
- Not connecting with the adult leader/coach

Youths tend to stay interested and engaged in livestock projects if they are having fun and if their project seems worthwhile. Keeping them motivated and engaged can be difficult, even for the best coaches. However, the more coaches understand motivation and its effect on youths, the more successful they will be.

Teach effectively

No matter how much you understand the importance of communication, motivation, and credibility in coaching youths, you will not be a successful coach if you cannot teach effectively. Successful coaches know their subject matter and can effectively pass along that information to youths. Because raising livestock is a hands-on experience, you must be able to establish creative ways of teaching the needed skills to youths. Effective teaching involves research, planning, implementation, and evaluation.

Research

Many coaches believe they can begin coaching youth livestock projects based on their prior experiences. But if you have not been associated with livestock projects for many years, you may be unaware of important changes. Adult leaders must constantly research the 4-H and FFA livestock program to stay up-to-date about livestock show rules and regulations, state validation procedures, industry trends, breed changes, and other important information.

Planning

Because youth livestock projects involve long-term responsibilities, coaches need to develop long-term and short-term plans of action.

Long-term plans should focus on major events that take place over the project year, such as ownership deadlines, validations, weigh-ins, veterinarian visits, wormings, project meetings, and tag-ins. Long-term planning should take place monthly and include all major events that will occur during that month.

In your long-term plan, help the youths set and achieve project and personal goals. It is important that you also

set long-term personal goals for yourself, so that you experience intrinsic rewards and feel that your efforts are paying off.

Short-term plans include day-to-day planning for the care, feeding, and managing of livestock projects, as well as setting goals. Short-term goals should include setting feeding and exercising times, a time for cleaning pens, and a schedule for administering vaccinations. In addition, short-term goals should work toward achieving long-term goals.

Implementation

Once you have researched and planned for youth livestock projects, you are ready to put this knowledge and planning into practice. The implementation phase is crucial because it helps you determine the project's success.

Implementation may include developing your teaching style and understanding how youths learn best. Because much of raising livestock projects is hands-on, you will want to create activities to teach youths in a hands-on method. "Learning by Doing," a slogan adopted by the Texas AgriLife Extension Service, represents a teaching approach that makes programs like 4-H and FFA so successful.

Evaluation

Good project evaluation will help you discover what the youths have learned and how they have grown throughout the project year. Evaluating what they know at the beginning of the project year can help you in the research, planning, and implementation phases of your teaching and coaching. Postproject evaluation will help determine whether the youths achieved their goals and whether you were an effective coach.

Another important component of evaluation is feedback. Be sure to communicate the outcomes of the project year to the youth. This allows both you and the young person to collectively evaluate the year and make adjustments for the future.

Conclusion

Coaching is one of many factors that can positively influence youths in livestock projects. Successful coaching by parents, adult volunteers, county Extension agents, and agricultural science teachers helps a young person gain knowledge, build skills and character traits, and develop motivation to continue participating in livestock projects.

A successful adult coach has a defined coaching philosophy and objectives, uses appropriate coaching styles, communicates effectively, gains credibility with youths, motivates youths, and teaches effectively. If you have

these characteristics and embrace this important role, you give youths a solid foundation for success, both in the show ring and in life.

References

- Lussier, R. N., and C. F. Achua. Leadership: Theory, Application, Skill Development. South-Western College Publishing: Cincinnati, Ohio, 2001.
 - Martens, Rainer. Successful Coaching, 2nd ed. Human Kinetics: Champaign, Illinois, 1990.
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What Is My Coaching Style?

Please read each of the following scenarios carefully and determine whether it represents a command style, a submissive style, or a cooperative style of coaching. There is only one correct answer for each scenario.

Scenario 1

Tom decides to become a livestock project coach for a select group of young people showing market swine. He participated in both 4-H and FFA during his youth and was successful in showing pigs. Tom had six county show champions and four breed champions at three of the major livestock shows. He is confident of his level of expertise, even though he has not been involved with show pigs for almost 15 years.

When Tom begins coaching, he is demanding and does not allow the youths to express their feelings and/or opinions. Tom always thinks he is right, even when he is not. He demands that the youths work with their projects for 4 hours a day because that is what he did when he showed pigs. He also believes winning is everything. The youths do not have much fun and are scared of Tom. They decide not to participate next year.

Scenario 2

Sandra is a livestock project coach for a group of youths who show market steers. She is knowledgeable about the project and was successful when she showed market steers.

Sandra is an encouraging coach who believes that youth feedback is important. She admits that she is not an expert, but she attends workshops and trainings to make herself a better coach. The youths she is involved with respect her and have lots of fun working with her and caring for their livestock projects. Sandra believes that youths have a great opportunity to gain responsibility by being held accountable for their actions. She stresses life skills and character traits to her youths. When the youths are finished with the project year, they feel they have learned a lot and are excited about next year.

Scenario 3

Bill is a livestock project coach for a group of youth who show market lambs. He agreed to do this because no other adult was interested. He is not very knowledgeable about the project and has no real motivation to learn anything new.

Bill lets the youths take care of the lambs in whatever way they feel is best. He is not good at communicating with them and doesn't interfere with the way they care for their animals. The only time that Bill becomes more involved is when a lamb gets sick or when a young person has not fed an animal in a couple of days. The youths do not really respect Bill and do not listen to what he says if he does tell them something. The youths have not learned much because of Bill's lack of guidance and teaching. They are not looking forward to next year.

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Review Test

1. **T / F** Successful coaches help youths develop new skills and enjoy competing with others; they believe that winning is the most important thing for youth development.
2. **T / F** Having a defined coaching philosophy is an important aspect of being a successful coach.
3. **T / F** Youths who do not win Grand Champion are typically not successful.
4. **T / F** The three most widely used coaching styles are command, submissive, and cooperative.
5. **T / F** Coaches who provide little guidance and teaching and rarely intervene with youth livestock projects have a submissive style of coaching.
6. **T / F** The cooperative style of coaching produces the most youth development and character education in youth livestock projects.
7. **T / F** Coaches do not need to gain credibility with youths to be successful.
8. **T / F** Effective teachers must be able to disseminate information but do not have to be knowledgeable about specific subject matter.
9. **T / F** Successful coaches must effectively motivate youths to achieve their goals.
10. **T / F** Allowing youths to have fun during the livestock project period should not be a priority for a coach.

1. F 2. T 3. F 4. T 5. T 6. T 7. F 8. F 9. T 10. F

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